

Cherson and the conversion of Rus': an anti-revisionist view

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I

The story of the conversion to Byzantine Christianity of Prince Vladimir of Kiev and of many of his subjects has, in the accounts of most modern historians, conformed more or less to the following pattern. In the summer of 987 the rebellious general Bardas Phocas, master of most of Asia Minor, proclaimed himself emperor, and marched on Constantinople. The legitimate emperor, Basil II, was in a desperate position. Some time during that same summer he sent an embassy to Kiev with an urgent request for help. By the terms of a treaty they had concluded with the Empire in 971, the Russians were bound to give the Byzantines military assistance in case of need. Vladimir sent him a contingent of six thousand Varangian soldiers. This expeditionary force, which arrived on Byzantine territory in the spring of 988, saved Basil II, who defeated his rival in the battles of Chrysopolis and Abydos. The second of these battles was fought on 13 April, 989.

Vladimir was in a position to demand an exceptional reward for his services. By the agreement concluded in Kiev with Basil II, probably in September 987, he was promised the hand of the emperor's sister Anna. One condition only was imposed by Basil: his future brother-in-law must abandon his notorious pagan ways and become a Christian. To this Vladimir agreed. At this point in the story modern historians, faced with seemingly conflicting evidence in the sources, divide into two groups. Some, relying on a Russian hagiographical source of the second half of the eleventh century, the 'Memory and Eulogy of Vladimir', attributed to the monk James,¹ believe that Vladimir fulfilled his

1. Edited by E. Golubinsky, *Istoriya Russkoy Tserkvi*, I, 1 (Moscow 1901) 238-45; and by A. Zimin, *Kratkie Soobshcheniya Instituta Slavyanovedeniya* 37 (1963) 67-75.

part of the bargain almost at once, and was baptised in Kiev, his capital, in 988. Others, trusting more in the major Russian source, the Primary Chronicle, compiled in the early twelfth century, date his baptism a year or so later, to 989, and place it in the Crimea, in the Byzantine city of Cherson, which Vladimir had captured in that same year.² This second version usually results in the following scenario. Having promised to accept Christianity, Vladimir awaited his bride, either in Kiev or else further south, by the rapids of the Dnieper, where he is known to have journeyed, probably in the summer of 988. But Anna showed no sign of arriving, and before long Vladimir began to suspect that Basil II, now that the acute danger to his throne was over, was in no hurry to honour his promise. Byzantine princesses of imperial stock were in any case not supposed to marry 'barbarians', and Anna was clearly unwilling to be sacrificed on the altar of her brother's political designs. Faced with these delaying tactics, Vladimir decided to force the emperor's hand. To launch an attack on Constantinople was a costly and risky undertaking: so he resolved to strike nearer home, at the Byzantine possessions in the Crimea. The subsequent events are described in the Primary Chronicle: Vladimir's capture of Cherson, his threat to Basil II to deal with Constantinople as he had dealt with Cherson, the dispatch of Anna to the Crimea, Vladimir's baptism in Cherson, and his marriage in that city. Cherson was then returned to the emperor as a kind of dowry, and Vladimir and his bride, accompanied by members of the local clergy, journeyed to Kiev, where Christianity was declared the official religion, and the Kievan citizens were baptized in the Dnieper.³

This then is what might be called the standard version of Vladimir's conversion. With its two variants — baptism in Kiev or baptism in Cherson — it commands the support of the majority of present-day historians. Vladimir's capture of Cherson is depicted as an act of aggression against Basil II, aimed at ex-

2. *Povest' vremennykh let*, ed. D.S. Likhachev and V.P. Adrianova-Peretts (Moscow-Leningrad 1950) i, 59-80; English translation by S.H. Cross and O.P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor (Cambridge, Mass. 1953) 96-116.

3. *Povest'*, i, 75-7; Engl. transl., 111-17.

erting pressure on the emperor to honour his promise to send his sister to Rus'.

In 1976, the Polish scholar, Andrzej Poppe, in an article published in *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, offered a new interpretation of the Cherson campaign, standing the traditional version, as it were, on its head. He believes that Vladimir captured the city as an ally, not as an enemy, of Basil II: for, he claims, Cherson had declared itself for the emperor's rival, the rebellious general Bardas Phocas; and Vladimir, in league with his imperial brother-in-law, restored legitimate Byzantine authority over the city.⁴ In support of his thesis Poppe marshalls a number of arguments, which he deploys with learning and ingenuity. Three of them are of major importance: the first is based on chronology, the second on economics, the third on textual criticism.

First, his argument from chronology. The Varangian soldiers sent by Vladimir helped Basil II to defeat Bardas Phocas at the battles of Chrysopolis on the Bosphorus, and Abydos on the Dardanelles. The date of the battle of Chrysopolis is uncertain; the battle of Abydos took place on 13 April, 989.⁵ It was only then that the threat to Basil II's throne was finally removed. Now Cherson was captured by Vladimir most probably in the same year, 989. Poppe arrives at this dating by combining the evidence on unusual celestial phenomena provided by the Byzantine chronicler Leo the Deacon, the Arab historian Yahya of Antioch, and the Armenian historian Asoghik (Stephen of Taron).⁶ So, to quote Poppe, 'it is difficult to accept a situation in which Vladimir's soldiers were fighting for Basil at the same time that Vladimir was organizing an expedition against this emperor and besieging Cherson to secure his right to the hand of the emperor's sister'.⁷

Poppe's second argument rests on the economic ties which, in the tenth century, existed between Cherson and the northern coast

4. 'The Political Background to the Baptism of Rus'. Byzantine-Russian Relations between 986-89', *DOP* 30 (1976) 195-244. Reprinted in the same author's *The Rise of Christian Russia* (London, Variorum Reprints, 1982).

5. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 211.

6. See below, notes 18, 19, 21, 23.

7. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 212.

of Asia Minor. These ties are described in the final chapter of the *De administrando imperio*, in which we are told that, unless the Chersonites can import grain from the provinces on this coast, they 'cannot live'.⁸ Hence, in Poppe's words, 'whoever had control of the . . . provinces on the Black Sea had the key to Cherson'. And since this, in 987 and 988, had been the usurper Bardas Phocas, 'economic reasons alone', to quote Poppe again, 'were sufficient for Cherson's recognition of the real ruler of Asia Minor'.⁹

Poppe's third argument requires, for its acceptance, an emendation to the text of the Russo-Byzantine treaty of 944, cited in the Primary Chronicle. The relevant clause forbids the ruler of Rus' to attack Cherson and its region, orders him, in other words, to keep away from the Byzantine possessions in the Crimea. The key sentence is *i ta strana ne pokaryaetsya vam*¹⁰ — 'let that country not submit to you' — 'you' being the Russians. The syntax of this passage is admittedly obscure — and this led Shakhmatov, the leading authority on medieval Russian chronicles, to emend *vam* ('you') to *nam* ('us') and so to reverse the sense of the sentence, which now comes to mean that if the country of Cherson should 'not submit to us', that is rebel against Byzantine authority, 'then, if the Prince of Rus' asks us for soldiers to wage war, we shall give him as many as he needs'.¹¹ In other words, as emended by Shakhmatov, this article of the 944 treaty would mean that, if Cherson and its region rebelled against imperial sovereignty, the prince of Kiev could intervene militarily to restore order in the city, and could count for this on Byzantine support.

These, then, are the three principal arguments advanced by Poppe in support of his thesis that Vladimir attacked Cherson on behalf of his ally Basil II. They are not without weight, and so it is perhaps understandable that they are impressing a growing number of historians. Among them we find Father

8. Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De administrando imperio*, ed. Gy. Moravcsik, Engl. transl. R.J.H. Jenkins, ch. 53 (Washington, D.C. 1967) 286.

9. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 222.

10. *Povest'*, 37; Engl. transl., 76.

11. A.A. Shakhmatov, *Povest' Vremennykh Let*, i (Petrograd 1916) 57, n.5; 379, n.5.

Podskalsky, Ludolf Müller, and Vladimir Vodoff.¹² The first two unhesitatingly, the third more guardedly, have accepted Poppe's thesis.

Poppe himself, in the concluding section of his article, shows a readiness to welcome a critical examination of his thesis.¹³ I am not aware that this has yet been attempted, at least in print, all these twelve years. So I would like here to take up the challenge, and first of all to examine his three principal arguments.

II

First, the argument from chronology. Does the traditional view of the Cherson affair really require us to accept that Vladimir's troops were simultaneously fighting for Basil II in the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles, and against him in the Crimea? Here the crucial problem, as Poppe rightly states, is the dating of the implementation of the Russo-Byzantine agreement concluded in Kiev in the autumn of 987.¹⁴ He believes that the Varangian infantrymen sent by Vladimir did not arrive in Constantinople before the spring or summer of 988, while the siege of Cherson began before the winter of 988. This double dating comes near to justifying his claim that acceptance of the traditional version requires us to believe that Russian troops were simultaneously fighting for and against Basil II. But is Poppe's dating correct?

Let us first consider the dispatch of the Varangians from Kiev to Constantinople. In Poppe's view, this expeditionary corps, six thousand strong, could not have left Kiev before the end of April, or even before May, 988. So late a departure, he argues, was due partly to the time (several months) required to assemble and equip the necessary boats, and partly to the sailing conditions on the Black Sea, discouraging to winter navigation. We may note in passing that, in common with most historians, Poppe believes

12. G. Podskalsky, *Christentum und theologische Literatur in der Kiever Rus' (988-1237)* (Munich 1982) 18; L. Müller, *Die Taufe Russlands: Die Frühgeschichte des russischen Christentums bis zum Jahre 988* (Munich 1987), 109-11; V. Vodoff, *Naissance de la chrétienté russe* (Paris 1988) 80.

13. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 243.

14. *Ibid.*, 229.

that the Cherson campaign was a naval one.¹⁵ His picture of the process of equipping the Varangian boats is based on the account, in the ninth chapter of the *De administrando imperio*, of the preparation of *monoxyla*, dug-out canoes, used for transporting Russian merchandise to Byzantium. This was indeed a lengthy operation, involving the cutting down and hollowing out of trees, and their construction into sea-worthy boats.¹⁶ It must have taken months. However, I find it hard to believe that Vladimir's six thousand Varangians sailed to Constantinople in dug-out canoes. It is surely more likely that they used Viking ships, many of which must have been easily available in Kiev and in other stations on the Baltic-Black Sea waterway. A parallel to the problem of logistics that faced Vladimir in the autumn of 987 was not the slow and laborious construction of commercial *monoxyla*, but a military crisis that occurred in Kiev a few years earlier. About 980, the Primary Chronicle tells us, Vladimir was faced with an incipient revolt of his Varangian retainers: furious at the prince's unwillingness, or inability, to pay them their wages, they demanded that 'he show them the way to the Greeks'.¹⁷ They were then dispatched by Vladimir to Constantinople. The wording of the passage suggests that these Varangians were warlike and numerous. With this parallel in mind, we may legitimately suppose that at least some of the six thousand Varangians were sent by Vladimir to Basil II soon after the conclusion of the treaty of 987, perhaps in the autumn of that year. We must remember, too, how desperate was Basil's need for military help at that time.

If the dispatch of the Varangians from Kiev to Constantinople can be moved back to the end of 987, equally the beginning of the siege of Cherson can be moved forward at least to the summer of 989, i.e. a year or so later than Poppe's dating of the event. The crucial evidence is that of Leo the Deacon, who wrote in the closing years of the tenth century. His is the only Byzantine text

15. *Ibid.*, 239, note 143; cf. A. Bert'e-Delagard (Berthier Delagarde), 'Kak Vladimir osazhdal Korsun', *Izvestiya Otdeleniya russkogo Yazyka i Slovesnosti Imp. Akademii Nauk* 14, 1 (1909) 244-6.

16. *De administrando imperio*, 56-8; Commentary, ed. R.J.H. Jenkins (London 1962) 23-5.

17. *Povest'*, 56; Engl. transl., 93.

to mention Vladimir's capture of Cherson. In the concluding section of his *History* Leo describes a series of celestial phenomena which occurred in the last months of the reign of the Emperor John Tzimiskes (969-76), and the early years of the reign of his successor, Basil II. These phenomena, he tells us, were all sinister and foretold calamities that were later to overtake the Byzantine state. (1) Firstly, at the beginning of August 975 there appeared a comet which was visible for eighty days and, in his judgement, predicted untold misfortunes, and the 'almost complete destruction of the Roman realm'.¹⁸ According to the eleventh-century Armenian historian Stephen of Taron (Asoghik) this comet was visible until the autumn of that year.¹⁹ (2) Next, in 986, during Basil II's campaign in Bulgaria, a meteorite fell near the Byzantine camp, foretelling the defeat of the emperor's army.²⁰ (3) A final list of calamities is said by Leo to have been foretold by the rise of 'a star'.²¹ There is little doubt that this 'star', later in the same passage described by Leo as a comet, is Halley's comet.²² According to Yahya of Antioch, the comet was visible in Cairo from 27 July to c.15 August, 989, while Stephen of Taron dates its appearance to 15 August of that year.²³ 'Thereafter' (αὐθις), Leo continues, 'columns of fire' (πύρινοι στύλοι) were seen late at night in the northern sky; they 'foretold' (παρεδήλουν) the capture (τὴν ἄλωσιν) of Cherson by the Tauroscythians (i.e. the Russians) and the occupation (τὴν κατάσχεσιν) of Verroia by the Mysians (i.e. the Bulgarians).²⁴ The date of the fall of the Macedonian town of Verroia is unknown.²⁵ Attempts have been

18. Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 10, 6, ed. C.B. Hase (Bonn 1828) 168-9.

19. *Histoire universelle par Etienne Asolik de Tarôn, traduite de l'arménien et annotée par F. Macler* (Paris 1917), ch. 10, pp.48-9; *Des Stephanos von Taron Armenische Geschichte*, transl. H. Gelzer and A. Burckhardt (Leipzig 1907) 190.

20. Leo Diaconus, *op. cit.*, 10, 8 (p.172).

21. *Ibid.*, 10, 10 (pp.175-6).

22. Halley's Comet was next seen in March 1066, an appearance that was taken to foretell the Battle of Hastings (October 1066) and was depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry. See C.A. Ronan, *Edmond Halley. Genius in Eclipse* (London 1970) 150, 240.

23. *Histoire de Yahya-ibn-Sa'id d'Antioche*, in *Patrologia Orientalis* 23, p.433; Stephen of Taron, Macler transl. (see note 19) 132.

24. *Ibid.*, 175.

25. V.N. Zlatarski (*Istoriya na Bŭlgarskata Dŭržhava prez srednite vekove*, 1, 2 [Sofia 1927] 681) dates the fall of Verroia to the second half of 989, but his dating is based on a misinterpretation of a passage in Yahya.

made, most recently by Poppe, to date the 'columns of fire' — generally regarded as *aurora borealis* — by identifying them with a phenomenon observed in Cairo from 7 to 12 April 989 and described by Yahya. It was marked by a violent thunderstorm and high winds, followed by darkness and the appearance in the sky of 'something resembling a column of fire' which spread a red colour over the sky and the earth. The air was filled with dust, which made breathing difficult. For the next five days the sun rose with a changed colour.²⁶ However, the Soviet scholar O.M. Rapov has convincingly shown that Yahya's account bears no resemblance to a picture of *aurora borealis*; rather does it resemble the results of a volcanic eruption; a group of volcanoes extends over part of Syria and Western Arabia; their eruption would have affected the inhabitants of Cairo, but could hardly have been visible in Byzantium.²⁷ Hence the phenomena observed in Egypt between 7 and 12 April 989 were unconnected with the *aurora borealis* described by Leo, which remains undated. And we are left, as a terminus *post quem* for Vladimir's capture of Cherson, with the dated appearance of Halley's comet, 27 July-15 August 989.

A further passage in Leo's account of the disasters of 989 will allow us to extend the probable date of the city's fall at least by a few more months. The prophetic comet, he tells us, foretold a further calamity: a severe earthquake which damaged many buildings in Constantinople and demolished the dome of St Sophia.²⁸ This earthquake can be dated precisely to the night of 25-6 October 989.²⁹

26. Yahya, *op. cit.*, 432-3; cf. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 211-12. *Aurora borealis* has occasionally been seen as far south as Egypt, Southern Arabia, and India: see O.M. Rapov, 'O date prinyatiya khristianstva knyazem Vladimirom i Kievlyanami', *Voprosy Istorii* (1984), no. 6, 37. Cf. V.G. Vasil'evsky, 'K istorii 976-986 godov', *Trudy* 2, 1 (St Petersburg 1909) 83; V.R. Rozen, *Imperator Vasiliy Bolgaroboitsa* (St Petersburg 1883) 214-15.

27. Rapov, *ibid.* Cf. T. Simkin and others, *Volcanoes of the World*, Smithsonian Institution (Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania 1981) 40.

28. Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 10, 10 (pp.175-6). Cf. Yahya, *op. cit.*, 428-9; Asoghik, *op. cit.*, MacIer transl. (see above, note 19) 132-3.

29. This was the night of the feast of the *megalomartyrs* St Demetrios of Thessaloniki: Leo Diaconus, *ibid.*; *Synaxarion* of the Church of Constantinople, ed. H. Delehaye (Brussels 1902) 166; cf. C. Mango, 'The Collapse of St Sophia, Psellus and the

In his summing up of the disasters of 989, Leo makes it clear that all of them were foretold by [Halley's] comet, and hence took place after the comet's rise (ἐπιτολή)³⁰ which, as we have seen, took place between 27 July and 15 August 989. This applied as much to the 'columns of fire' (*aurora borealis*), whose exact date is unknown, as to the earthquake of 25 October 989. Did the *aurora borealis* take place before or after the earthquake? Either view is tenable; however, the fall of Cherson, foretold in Leo's text both by the rise of the comet and by the *aurora borealis*, is more likely to have followed the latter phenomenon after a certain interval. The balance of probabilities thus favours the view that Cherson was captured by Vladimir *after* 25 October 989.

When, then, did the siege of Cherson begin? According to a late medieval Russian hagiographical document, which may be based on an earlier source, the siege lasted nine months.³¹ The earliest it could have ended was 26 October 989: which, on this reckoning, would date its beginning to February of that year. However, if we allow for a reasonable interval between the earthquake of 25 October and the *aurora borealis*, the beginning of the siege could plausibly be dated to the summer of 989. This is a more suitable time than the previous winter for the transport by water of Vladimir's expeditionary force from Kiev to the estuary of the Dnieper, and thence to the Crimea. Most probably, therefore, the siege of Cherson lasted from the summer of 989 to the late winter or early spring of 990.³²

This revised chronology, which leaves an interval of nearly two years between Vladimir's dispatch of his Varangians to Constan-

Etymologicum Genuinum', in *Gonimos: Neoplatonic and Byzantine Studies presented to L.G. Westerink* (Buffalo, N.Y. 1988) 168. Cf. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 211-12.

30. In the recent Russian translation of Leo the Deacon's *History* the words τὴν τοῦ ἀστέρος ἐπιτολήν are wrongly rendered as 'padenie zvezdy': transl. M. Kopylenko, ed. G. Litavrin (Moscow 1988) 91.

31. Bert'e-Delagard (see above, note 15) 243-4, 276-7.

32. Rapov (*art. cit.*, 43) concludes that the siege of Cherson began in the late summer or early autumn of 989, and ended in April or May 990. This would tally with the dating by the eleventh-century Russian monk James: see N.M. Bogdanova, 'O vremeni vzyatiya Khersona knyazem Vladimirom', *VV* 47 (1986) 40; cf. E. Shmurlo, 'Kogda i gde krestilsya Vladimir Svyatoy', *Zapiski Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestva v Prage* i (Prague 1927) 143-4.

tinople and the launching of his campaign against Cherson, hardly justifies Poppe's claim that these were simultaneous events. This interval would leave ample time for a process crucial to the traditional interpretation of the Cherson campaign: Vladimir's growing awareness that Basil II, now that the acute danger to his throne had been removed, was dragging his feet, and perhaps even reneging on his promise to send his sister to Kiev. Perhaps the truth dawned on him when, in 988 or 989 — if we can believe his putative eleventh-century Russian biographer, James the Monk — he journeyed south, to the Dnieper rapids, with the intention, no doubt, of meeting his bride and escorting her over the most perilous section of the route.³³ When Anna failed to turn up, Vladimir must have understood that 'the Greeks' were up to their usual two-faced games. Hence his decision to force the emperor's hand by attacking Cherson.

Poppe's other two arguments can be considered more briefly. He argues that the commercial links between Asia Minor and Cherson paved the way for the city's recognition of Bardas Phocas. Bardas proclaimed himself emperor in the late summer of 987 and, by the end of that year, was master of virtually all of Asia Minor. Poppe believes that, by the agreement concluded in Kiev in September 987, the Byzantine envoys persuaded Vladimir, as part of the deal, to remove by force Cherson from Bardas' jurisdiction and to restore the city to Basil II.

It should be emphasized that no documentary evidence exists of any link between Bardas and Cherson. It is true that, according to Leo the Deacon, Bardas during his rebellion occupied the coastal cities of Asia Minor, except Abydos.³⁴ But this is far from warranting the conclusion that his authority extended across

33. Vladimir's journey to the Dnieper rapids is dated to 988 by M.V. Levchenko (*Ocherki po istorii russko-vizantiiskikh otnosheniy* [Moscow 1956] 359-60) and by Poppe (*art. cit.*, 241). Rapov (*art. cit.*, 44-5) provides fairly strong reasons for preferring 989.

34. Leo Diaconus, *Historiae*, 10, 9 (p.173). However, as Dr J.D. Howard-Johnston has pointed out to me, the context of the passage suggests that Leo had the coast of the Sea of Marmara particularly in mind. The Black Sea and its coast, the control of which would have deflected Bardas from his main target, Constantinople, must have been in his eyes of very minor importance.

the Black Sea to the Crimea. Here too, moreover, Poppe has difficulties with chronology. Unless we imagine a previous collusion between the usurper and the Chersonites — which seems highly improbable — we are faced with too many events and too little time. If Poppe is right we would have to believe that during the few weeks of that fateful summer of 987 Bardas' rebellion spread throughout Asia Minor, the Chersonites were persuaded to join his cause, and the authorities in Constantinople were informed of this fact, before the dispatch, in the same summer, of Basil II's embassy to Kiev. We would have to imagine an extraordinarily rapid movement of military intelligence, and split-second decisions in the Byzantine capital. Possible, perhaps; but in my view unlikely.

Poppe's third argument, it will be recalled, relies on an emendation to the text of the Russo-Byzantine treaty of 944. To support this emendation he points to the evidence of Cherson's past disloyalty to the Empire; and he argues that, in using the Rus' as his agents to ensure the city's loyalty, Basil II in 987 was doing no more than what the Emperor Romanos I had done in 944.

Whatever may be said linguistically in favour of this emendation, historically it seems to me in highest degree implausible. In the first place, there is no evidence that the Chersonites were disloyal to the Empire when the Russo-Byzantine treaty of 944 was concluded. Quite the reverse: in that same year — 944 — when Igor, prince of Kiev, launched a military campaign against Byzantium, the emperor was forewarned of the approaching danger by the intelligence bureau of the governor of Cherson. His message to Byzantium was recorded by the Primary Chronicle as follows: 'Behold, the Russians are coming in countless ships, and the ships have covered the sea'.³⁵ Moreover, by the time of Basil II and Vladimir, the treaty of 944 had been superseded by another. In July 971, after a savage war between Byzantium and Rus', a treaty was negotiated between the Emperor John Tzimiskes and the prince of Kiev Svyatoslav, Vladimir's father. Its text is given, in a Slavonic translation, in the Primary Chronicle. One of its clauses shows that Svyatoslav was made solemnly to pro-

35. *Povest'*, 33-4; Engl. transl., 72-3.

mise that he would never interfere in the affairs of Cherson and the other Byzantine lands in southern Crimea.³⁶ I find it hard to believe that the Byzantine government, which attached the highest importance to its Crimean possessions, and had struggled for centuries to prevent neighbouring peoples from interfering in the affairs of Cherson, should have conceded by treaty this right of interference to the ruler of a people that had shown itself four times in the past seventy-five years a determined enemy of the Empire, and had threatened the whole Byzantine defensive system on the northern coast of the Black Sea.³⁷

Poppe's three principal arguments, I suggest, are open to serious objections on historical grounds. They seem to me to warrant, at the very least, the verdict 'not proven'. But, in a more positive sense, they can, I believe, be refuted by several counter-arguments. Very briefly and in conclusion, I would like to advance three.

III

The first, which is mentioned by Poppe, is based on the evidence of Leo the Deacon, the only Byzantine source to mention Vladimir's capture of Cherson. This event which, it will be recalled, was in Leo's view 'foretold' by the rise of Halley's comet and the appearance of *aurora borealis*, is listed by him among the 'calamities' (ἄλλα παγγάλεπα) which overtook Byzantium. It is clear therefore that Leo, a contemporary and reliable author who had taken part in Basil II's campaign in 986 against the

36. *Povest'*, 52; Engl. transl., 89-90.

37. Poppe attempts to support his theory of a Russo-Byzantine alliance against Cherson in 987-9 by pointing to a passage in the chronicle of Skylitzes which could be taken to mean that such an alliance was concluded in 1016. In that year Basil II, assisted by (the otherwise unknown) Sfengos, Vladimir's brother, sent a naval force to subject the land of Khazaria: Ioannis Scylitzae *Synopsis historiarum*, ed. I. Thurn (Berlin 1973) 354. Cf. Levchenko, *op. cit.*, 383-4; Poppe, *art. cit.*, 223, 239, note 145. But even if 'Khazaria' does in this passage mean the Crimea (which Poppe, and some other scholars, believe), the most that can be conceded to Poppe is that a combined Russo-Byzantine operation against a rebellious Cherson was launched in 1016. This, however, is no argument in favour of his thesis that a generation earlier and in quite different circumstances the Byzantine government encouraged the ruler of Rus' to attack Cherson single-handed.

Bulgarians, regarded the fall of the cities of Cherson and Verroia as comparable misfortunes that had struck the Empire.

My second argument is based on the matrimonial customs of the ruling house of Byzantium. These forbade marriages between members of the imperial family, more especially princesses 'born in the purple', and barbarian rulers. Anna, Vladimir's bride, was such a princess. Basil II must have been in desperate straits, and Vladimir able to exert the strongest pressure, for the royal family of Kiev to be accorded this signal honour, which twenty years earlier had been refused to the German emperor, who stood far above him in status and power. As Poppe himself admits, Vladimir's capture of Cherson could have provided such pressure.³⁸

My third and final argument rests on the crucial position occupied by Cherson in the Empire's security and balance of power in the North. During much of the tenth century, as we have seen, the Byzantine government strove by every means to protect the city from the political ambitions of the rulers of Kiev.³⁹ We may well ask ourselves whether Basil II would deliberately have started a chain of events which, as he must have at least suspected, would lead to the capture, sacking and partial destruction of the gem of all the Byzantine possessions on the northern coast of the Black Sea. I find that hard to believe.

The aim of this paper has been to examine critically Poppe's revisionist view of the events of 987 to 990. I have made no attempt to discuss the relative merits of the two alternative versions of the traditional account of Vladimir's baptism, and to arbitrate between the apparently conflicting claims of Kiev and Cherson as the place where it occurred. This would require a thorough scrutiny of a number of Slavonic and Oriental sources. And that is another story.

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38. Poppe, *art. cit.*, 219.

39. See D. Obolensky, 'The Empire and its Northern Neighbours, 565-1018' in *The Cambridge Medieval History* IV, 1 (Cambridge 1966) 510-11.

